

One significant trend in the writing of history is the gradual shifting from the written to the unwritten -oral tradition which is not only the strength but the very soul of every community, be it American or African native and any tribal community of North East India. The present book seeks to reconstruct the history of Mizos and their kindred tribes by adopting the methodology of orally and folk literature in the age of print culture. Coming inevitably with the later development of colonization, the appearance of print culture in Mizo society had opened the floodgate of print literature. To engage the interface between the print culture with that of orally and folk literature, a group of young and dynamic scholars with some established academicians in the region has given a brilliantly illuminating analysis on different themes on various communities of the region. There has been a long-felt need of the history of the unquiet region and its people, not written through the eyes of colonizers, but as seen by its own scholars who have an inside knowledge and the publication of the present book is definitely timely and fills up the gap hitherto remained unexplored. This is the book which no serious reader can afford to miss.

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A bold and novel attempt that aims to broaden the understanding of India's Northeast history by using new sources and unconventional methods. This singular exercise has brought out the richness of Tribal history that were ill recently limited by the text.

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ORALITY and FOLK LITERATURE in THE AGE of PRINT CULTURE India's Northeast Experience

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Chapter 6

PRODUCTION OF PLACE: FOLK GEOGRAPHIES AND RELIGIOUS DESIRE IN COLONIAL MIZORAM

David Vumallian Zou

The term 'imagined homes' is interchangeable with 'imagined geography' that the Subalternist historian Ajay Skaria (1999) used to describe the *dangi* (hill people)'s "agonistic relationship with surrounding plains areas" in colonial western India. The phrase also evokes Said's post-Orientalist use of "imaginative geography" as well as Anderson's "imagined communities" of print publics. If the former imagined a geographically ambitious "field" of Oriental learning defined by civilizational boundaries and scales, the latter imagined more modest portions of the world as nation-states delimited by firm national boundaries.

Another eclectic but creative way of thinking about 'imagined homes' is to consider them as 'folk ideas' or 'social imaginaries' in the sense of unstated and unquestioned premises that enable the formation of distinctive worldviews. Unlike explicitly stated social theories held by a few elites, the social imaginary is a 'common repertory' of folk ideas and narratives of being and becoming implicitly shared by the whole society.

Scientific social theory and received folk ideas may exist in tension as well as engage in dialogue. Locke's natural law of private property, for instance, made a successful transition from social theory to social imaginary and folk belief in Western societies (Dundes 1971, 1989; Taylor 2004).

Although these diverse scholarships are broadly attentive to the making of 'place-worlds' or imagined folk geographies, they are not seriously concerned with the relationship between territorial and religious imaginations. Now recent historical and ethnographic studies of indigenous societies in colonial Fiji and Kenya establish linkages between the political imagination of Christian converts and new notions of national territory (Tomlinson 2002; Peterson 2004). And in his ethnography of the Western Apache, Keith H. Basso demonstrates the connection between place-making and group identity. "For what people make of their place" says Basso "is closely connected to what they make of themselves as members of the society... *We are*, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine" (1996: 7). This piece may be seen as a contribution to this meager literature on place-making in indigenous tribal societies under the strains and stimuli of colonial contact.

Mizo Folk Geographies

The imagined geography of Mizo local cosmology had convergences worthy of serious attention. This cosmology and missionary print conspired to create three concentric zones expressed in terms of entrenched folk epistemologies revolving around the colonial grids of administrative and Mission headquarters at Aizawl; namely –

- (a) an imagined home called 'Zo ram' within the horizons of the Lushai hills
- (b) an ethnic borderland or *Vairum* (land of the *vais*) down the valleys and plains, and

- (c) the lands beyond *Tuifnriat*, the confluence of Eight Seas, including *Sapram* (land of the *sahibs*).

This cosmology of a concentric-circle arrangement of a centre and its satellites' (Tambiah 1976) mimicked the turbulent transformation of Lushai kinship matrix into inscribable Mizo ethnic entity under the British Raj.

Everyday perceptions of the physical world acquire depth of meaning only through some abstract or folk representations of place-worlds as a mechanism to classify and order the social world.

Spirits of the Soil

The poetic investment of land with emotions and spirits of the soil had contours of their own which were largely independent of the material environment or regulatory regimes. But ideas about forest spirits were solid facts as long as people regulate their behavior in terms of those ideas.

A person who dreaded a malignant spirit of a marshy and malarial plot would be kept out of that place as effectively as a person who respected the rights of property on the same plot.

Customary usages were in place to regulate access to forest commons by users with hierarchical claims to land use. The Mizo chief exercised the first choice in selecting the best plot for his own *jhum* (shifting cultivation). Then came the *ramhuals* who were master cultivators who advised the chief regarding the selection of the best *jhum* lands for each agricultural season. (Parry 1928: 7).

Improving Lushai Land

All pioneers – including colonial frontier officers, missionaries and new converts – identified themselves with the local landscape.

As a paternalist administrator, Thomas Lewin had initiated 'every measure of reform or improvement' to turn the Mizos into sedentary peasants. He offered loans in the hope that the locals would 'settle down to own, and hold land, as permanent cultivators' (Lewin 1912: 294).

But it largely remains a pipe dream except in the narrow valleys of Champhai and North Vanlaiphai where plow cultivation was introduced by Major John Shakespear in 1898 with the help of Santhal and Nepali farmers.¹

The British employed disciplinary techniques of rule such as cartography and boundaries that had consequences for Mizo political imagination of land and identity. In 1898, the Superintendent of the Lushai hills issued boundary papers (*ramri lekha*)² attached with cartographic sketches to twenty-six territorially delimited chiefs. Further, sale of paddy plot was reported from North Vanlaiphai in 1910³.

And by 1913, the colonial state began to lease land for horticultural use at a commercial node such as Sairang village.⁴ Conservative colonial officials seemed to be mortified by the disenchantment of spirit-owned lands constrained thus far by customs. A. G. McCall, the Lushai superintendent served this notice as late as 1934:

Please do not introduce the sale of any land ... no Lushai can on any account.⁵

The Raj desired to fossilize old patterns of Mizo land use in the face of the new colonial economy: this almost amounted to an invention of tradition.

In colonial Mizoram, land eventually became ownable for clans and households, but not by individuals until much later. It was inheritable by members of kin groups, but it was not saleable to outsiders.

Even as late as the colonial era, local British officials debated whether Lushai land titles were transferable. The idea of

marketable land titles became acceptable only after the coming of the plow to introduce wet-rice cultivation in the Champai valley and Vanlaphai valley.

Here land improvement physically and technologically fenced off those irrigated paddy fields from the unclaimed commons. Translated in legal terms, land assumed the form of alienable private property. Land in the form of 'garden' became salable within the colonial town of Aizawl and Thakthing village.

And an heir of the property 'may sell his garden to a person approved by the Superintendent' (Parry 1928: 15). As elsewhere, the relation between humans and land in the Lushai hills has always been dynamic and shifting.

Such notions of land spread to the towns of Aizawl and Lungleh, and apparently to village depots on the British supplies route between the Lushail hills and outside urban centers such as Silchar town and the Chitragong port. State registration of private titles lent sanctity to the new practice. In the 1910s, the British administration issues a number of licenses ('passes') to purchase house, build shops, sell goats, etc. at Aizawl's Bara Bazaar.⁶

Although humans (slaves such as *bawi* or *sai*) were saleable and exchanged with firearms in pre-colonial Lushai hills, this logic was not easily applied to ancestral lands, for that would meant mortgaging the ancestors.

Spiritualizing Lushai Land

Though the early Mizo Christians insulated themselves against their immediate 'pagan' milieu, they kept the windows of their mind open to Christian news around the world. In fact, they imagined themselves as part of a larger evangelical community. Such spiritualization of space produced an imaginative geography that reshaped the Mizo life-world. This

sacred geography initially attempted to erase traditional Mizo landmarks to inscribe new Christian symbols.

Elements of such spatial spirituality subsequently gelled with the spiritual desire of Mizo converts who raved about a creatively imagined 'Holy Land' in Palestine and a "revivalist" Wales. Without much actual travel done, this spiritual traffic linked otherwise unconnected sites such as colonial Lushai Hills, Calvinistic Methodist Wales, and biblical Palestine.

A pioneer missionary in the Lushai Hills between 1897 and 1927, David Evan Jones effectively spiritualised the Lushai landscape to narrate the inner spiritual journey in the Apostolic path. Jones was quick to point out that the Lushai hills in size compared with Wales or Palestine.

The periodic journeys of Jones into interior parts of Mizoram from Aizawl assumed the form of the perilous but sacred pilgrimage of the soul. Each cold winter was the signal for his annual tour across the hills till the return of the next monsoon. Jones would carry with him an altimeter to record and remind the heights he climbed. Prevented him from hiring porters by hostile local chiefs, he carried his heavy packs by himself (Lloyd 1989). Jones wrote in his autobiography, 'As one who followed the footsteps of the Apostles, I found that travel needed to be an important part of my life too. Lushai hills was a rough country to travel ... steeper than roofs of houses in Britain' (Jones 1998: 76).

On more than one occasion, darkness befell Jones during a weary journey before reaching any human habitation. Jones also told how his travel party lost their way and followed a river to trace some tree markings: 'I was glad to prepare lodging in the river bed ... I slept as comfortably as if I had been at home. I did not have Jacob's experience but I assume that the God of Bethel watched over me' (p. 78).

People and Places on the Borderland

Sedentarized 'Vairam'

The Mizo traditionally had strong ties with settled agricultural or *paddy* states such as Manipur and Cachar: both were the targets of Lushai annual raids almost every spring season.

The ungoverned imaginings of pre-colonial Lushai were shaped by traditional cosmology and contacts with outsiders known as *vai* or *kawl* – especially the Burmese and the Bengalis. They were imagined to have lived in settled agricultural valleys called *vairam* on the border of the Lushai hills.

Neutral 'Vai' of the early colonial era

Originally, it was a neutral term and carried no derogatory meaning. *Mizo leb Vai Chanchinbu* (Mizo and Vai News) was the title of the Government journal published by the Superintendent, J. Shakespear in 1902 (Lalthangliana 2004: 151). Even as recently as 1914, *vairam* was employed neutrally to denote any 'foreign country', not necessarily the plains of India or Burma.

When J.H. Lorrain published his *Dictionary* in 1940, he defined the term *vai* as foreigners 'excluding Europeans, and latterly the better known neighbouring tribes as well' (Lorrain 1940: 539).

The Lushai initially called their British invaders *vai*. So, British occupation of their land was known as *Vai len* (Lorrain 1940: 540), meaning 'the advent of foreigners'. But the Lushais soon learned to differentiate between the white *vais* who conquered them and the non-white *vais* (Indic Indians) who had an inferior status within the colonial system. So, the Lushais referred to the white Britishers as *sap* to differentiate them from other *vais*.

Negative 'Vai' of the late colonial era

Under conditions of British colonial rule, the distinction

between Indic Indian *vais* and white *saps* grew very sharp. The connotation of the term *vai* changed negatively as a result of Mizo experience and contact with Indic Indians, especially the army personnel and Bengali traders and clerks.

In colonial Lushai hills, the *vais* known to the Mizo consisted of armed sepoys, unscrupulous merchants or Bengali clerks. Such crude encounters were hardly conducive to create favourable impressions on a frontier people's idea of *vai*. The negative stereotypes associated with *vai* continued even in the post-colonial period.

Lands beyond the sea

The Lushai knew they were sandwiched between three great cultural frontiers: Buddhist Burma, Islamic Bengal, and Hindu India. Beyond these borderlands of the valleys remained distant countries on the shores of *Tuifunriat*, the confluence of Eight Seas⁷. It is difficult to ascertain the imaginary eight seas or rivers.

Land of the Bible

For most Mizos, the land of the Bible was, after all, a highly spiritualised site with little correspondence to material geography on earth. Interest in the 'holy land' as a real place dawned very late. In 1942, members of the Synod Assembly expressed a desire to learn the 'historical aspect' of a speech delivered by one Mrs. Samuel on 'Life in Palestine'⁸. But it was not until the approach of India's independence that Bible geography was taught formally in the Sunday Schools of Mizo churches in 1945.

That year the Welsh missionary report read, 'Next year the subject will be the Geography of the Holy Land, which has been prepared in Lushai by Mrs. Sam Davies and Pasena⁹'. But by that time, the Mizo Christians had been already familiar with all the essential names of Bible geography such as Calvary,

Jerusalem, Jericho, Bethel, Bethlehem, Jordan, Galilee, Nazareth, Sinai, Babylon, *Tuipui Dum* (the Black Sea) Aigupta (Mizo translation for 'Egypt'¹⁰, etc.

These places were already internalised and immortalised through old worship hymns and new revival songs composed by local poets. An attempt to study such intimate places of the Christian soul would almost appear like a disenchantment of the world as revealed by the Mizo evangelical lens.

The Land of 'Sahibs' (Sapram)

Within the land of the 'sahibs', Wales, the home of *Zosaps* (Welsh missionaries) understandably occupied pride of place in the pages of *Kristian Tlangau*.

Kristian Tlangau occasionally carried wood-cut images associated with Wales. Such representations portrayed the land as a rather unearthly country of revival populated by exemplary and pious Christian souls. It was the land of the revivalist Evan Roberts and of Mary Jones with a passion for the Bible.

The imagined Wales of Mary Jones was a foreign country today. That was early industrial Wales of nonconformist Chapels vis-à-vis the Anglican Church at a historical moment when coal pits and railway lines began to transform visibly the familiar landscape, especially in South Wales.

Neither the Protestant Reformation nor British Puritanism deeply touched the lives of the subaltern classes in Wales. But Methodist revivals of the eighteenth century created a new interest in religion. As a result, nonconformity (a vital link between rural and industrial Wales) gave the Welsh people a truly national church in the shape of Calvinistic Methodist Church (Williams 1952: 243).

For the last time, Welsh nonconformity hit back at the modern age of machine with another 'revival' in the winter and spring of 1905. The last Welsh revival inspired otherwise

unconnected millennial movements in the Khasi hills and the Lushai hills of British Assam in 1906. Above all, the Welsh revival of 1904-05 ensured a supply of another generation of missionary enthusiasts for foreign missions in Assam and Sylhet (now in Bangladesh).

The monolithic conception of *Sapram* gave way to a more nuanced understanding during World War I when thousands of young Lushais travelled to France as Labour Corps. During the two World Wars, many young Lushais got the real experience of sailing to battle fields in Europe.

Conclusion

Ethnic identity, religious desire and imperial career found expression through modes of imagining landscape. Despite exposure to secular education, the Mizo 'world categories' were never completely subsumed by scientific knowledge; they survive in popular culture. After all, the spatial idioms of the Mizos were not static, but quite alert to changes in the material world. Moreover, the process of spiritualizing landscapes and self-reflexive acts of naming places and peoples — both real and imagined — ultimately fed into the political imagination of what was thinkable and actionable. Smearing under colonial occupation, Mizo converts to Christianity stole the Welsh revivalist fire to fashion an alien and Calvinistic faith to indigenous taste. The indigenous Mizo construct a modern identity largely through Judeo-Christian spatial spirituality connecting Wales, Palestine and Mizoram. The new utopia was all the more welcome to Mizo highlanders because it was different from nearer Bengali, Assamese or Burmese models in the lowlands.

Pre-colonial usages regulated access to forest commons through the ideology of jungle spirits (*huais*); but colonial law regulated the use of urban lands such as Aizawl through the

bureaucratic ideology of issuing licenses ('passes'). In the pre-colonial era, many clan lands converged into 'Lushai land.' Centered on Fort Aizawl, colonial rule created a single 'Lushai Hills District' by merging adjacent areas of Bengal in the south and Assam in the north. Among other factors, it was the colonial district map of British Assam that wedded ethnicity and land by making the 'land of Mizos' (Mizo-ram) an imaginable political project in post-colonial times. Only the Muse of history can reveal the future destinies of individual citizens within this rather limited imagination of a closed ethnic project.

Endnotes:

1. Mizoram State Archives (hereafter MSA), Aizawl, Political Department, CB 5, Pol - 48, dated Ajial 6 April 1904. From Major J. Shakespear, Superintendent, Lushai Hills; to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam.
2. MSA, Aizawl, Political Department, S/No. 55, Pol.1, CB 6, Subject: 'Ramri Leikha' 1898.
3. MSA, Aizawl, Political Department, CB-8, Pol-75, dated 22 May 1911.
4. MSA, Aizawl, Political Department, CB-19, dated Shillong 4 March 1913, from the Under Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam.
5. MSA, Aizawl, Political Department, CB-17, Office Orders, 10 June 1934 signed by A.G. McCall, to SDO Lungleh.
6. MSA, Aizawl, 1918, Pol.88, CB 19.
7. Synod Office Archives (hereafter SOA), Aizawl, *Kristian Tlangau* June 1912.
8. *Mizoram Presbyterian Kobhan Synod Thurel Lak Khaum* (Synod Minutes and Resolutions of the Presbyterian Church, Mizoram) Vol. I, 1910-1950; p. 147. Aizawl: Synod Literature and Publication Board, edited by Rev. H. Remthanga in 1996.
9. Reports of FMPCWM, p. 175.
10. SOA, Aizawl, *Kristian Tlangau* 1915.

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